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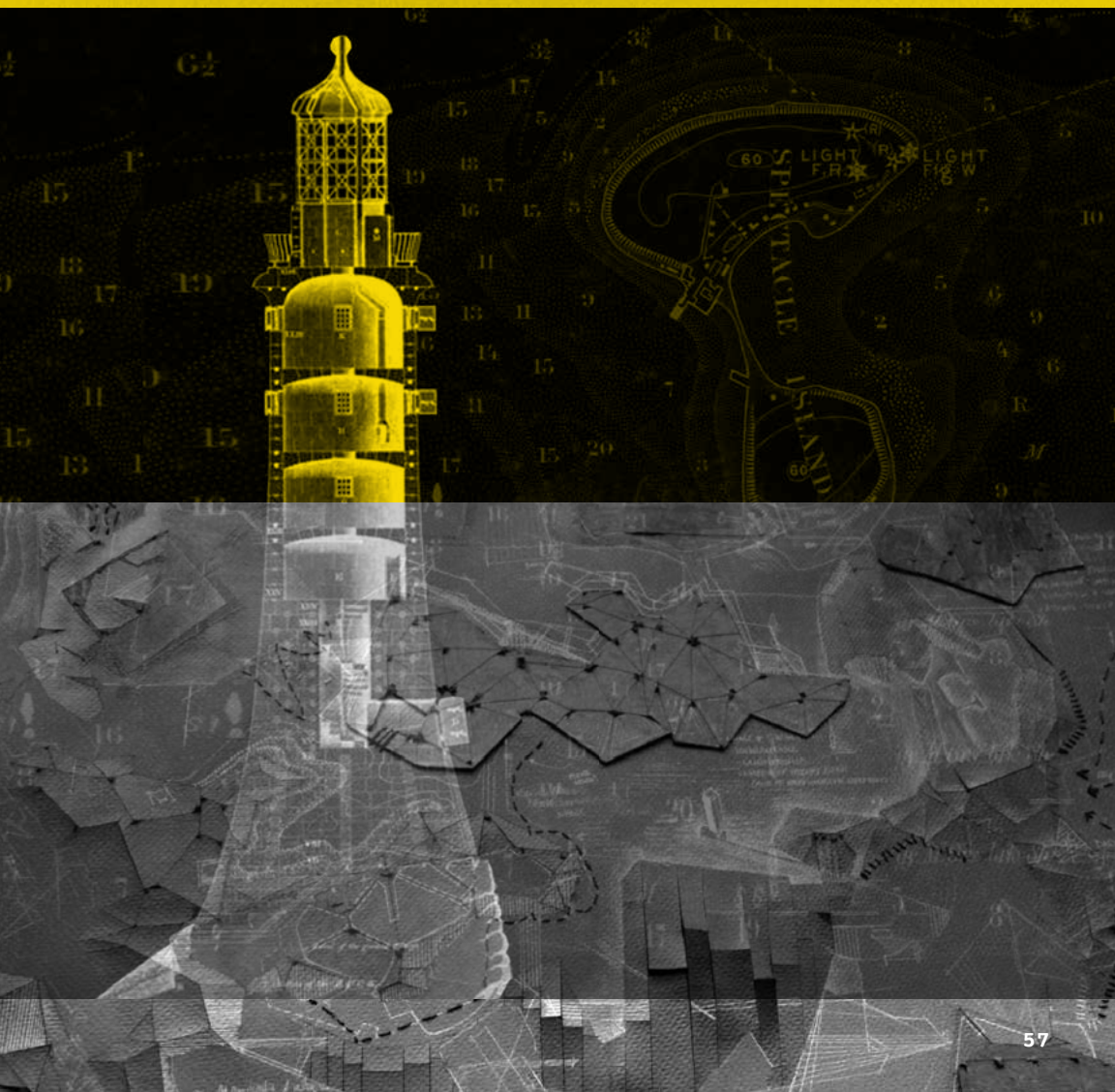
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THOMAS KELLEY

Thomas Kelley's work investigates, or as he prefers, mines errors in precession in pursuit of new perspectives. In his conversation with DATUM, he discusses his recent work as a resident of the American Academy in Rome, and his practice, NORMAN KELLEY.

Panel:
Tony Gonzalez
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G: Tony Gonzalez
M: Jonathan Melendez
K: Thomas Kelley

G: To start, we are interested in your lines of inquiry regarding dishonest drawings, delusions, and these kinds of things. We saw that your Rome Prize from the American Academy gave you the opportunity to bring your studies to Rome.

K: Rome is a point of origin for a lot of the work that I practice, especially in the past two years. So much Architecture is about defining the terms of a game. In our work as NORMAN/KELLEY, we tend to skirt around a series of words that include Illusions, Lies, but we try to do it in an intensely earnest way. Rome showcased a lot of earnest examples of how illusions, tricks of the eye, things we tend to look as gimmickry, can actually have really big consequences, both at the scale of audience, and at a political scale.

The poster child of that sort of work is Bramante. In Rome we have the Tempietto, which is a prime example, but I think to fully understand Bramante you have to go to Milan first, and Rome was a good base to travel both southern and northern Italy. The other players in Rome are Peruzzi, mainly for his interest in what we like to call 'freeing the drawing from the picture plane'. In most cases, such as the Villa Farnesina, he employed tromp l'oeil tactics that really start to not only collapse exterior and interior environments, but curate views that reverberate into how we define circulation. A room doesn't necessarily begin and end at its threshold.

Borromini is another excellent example, with his forced-perspective gallery in the Palazzo Spada. I was given the opportunity to access it and view it from the 'wrong side', appreciating the qualities that the immediacy of a site visit offers. The observer can relish in it from one vantage point, but from another, the illusion collapses.

M: It's really interesting how you frame the site visit. How important is the site visit for you? We've had a conversation in DATUM meetings before, we brought in guests and asked them about the relevancy and the role of the site visit, especially in the wake of our culture's over-saturation of media. How relevant do you think that site visits still are?

K: That's an excellent question. I was given the opportunity to give Sylvia Lavin and her students from UCLA a little tour of the American Academy, and that conversation came up. I think that it lends itself to a broader question, which is: "What is the role of going to Rome, anymore?" For some people like Michael Graves, it was everything. For someone like Thom Mayne, it's a great burden. I think we are trained that the Rome tour is grounded in truth. For me, it was not so much that but the opposite: the site visit offered me the opportunity to undermine the image of truth, exploring things that go beyond the ways that people document the past. It became about looking at Rome from the wrong vantage point, or, as I prefer, the peculiar vantage point.

G: This idea of truth is something that DATUM has been discussing. In the history of modernity, it seems like we talk about modernism as architecture of truth. But with examples like Mies' Farnsworth House, the heads of the rivets were ground off, and other tricks were deployed. We nonetheless think of him as an architect of truth. I'm curious how you think about modernism and it's relation to truth.

K: Coming from Chicago, I'm familiar with it as an earnest context to look at modernism. I think at this point, the practice is less interested in modernism as a material practice.

Maybe that lends itself to the fact that we're not 'scaling-up' quite yet. I think our conflict with modernism is something that's shared by many. We don't see Architecture as a discipline that's informed by professionalism and expertise, but rather a game about peculiar qualities that come out of looking at things through the lens of an amateur.

With Modernism, we try to fight the idea that there is a high-brow level of intellectualism that needs to exist before you develop or understand meaning. While it could be potentially interesting, I don't find that sort of heady rationalization for a formal practice interesting anymore.

G: So, how does your practice respond? How do you look for something that's more accessible?

K: I think that the trick hinges on the type of project that we're working on. Where abstract-expressionism tended to side more with modernism, we tend to side more with optical art. While we're interested in removing the 'handed-ness', like Mies trying to remove the 'handed-ness' when he paints his corners a matte-black, he's trying to produce an illusion, a lie. He's blurring the edge. We're trying to come at it from multiple angles, trying to produce as many audiences as possible. And as many readings as possible. Not all of which we can necessarily design for. The work that we do right now needs to be quick, frugal, and afford us the opportunity to not only make, but to observe how people interact, so that we can address things like scaling up - other things that are valuable.

M: Getting back to an earlier discussion, what first sparked your interest in illusions and mis-readings?

K: Where I'm coming from, the University of Illinois in Chicago, I would say that the pedagogy of the school, especially under the direction of Bob Somol, is that of the counter-intuitive. Trying to see what someone else misses, and making an argument about it. Bob's background is law, so he's a big fan of argument. We've refocused our understanding of illusions in that way. I don't necessarily think it's the end game, but maybe just the introduction to a more sophisticated game that we're interested in.

It's like a trailer, right? It's supposed to grab your attention. And we argue that the best architects were interested in using illusion for just that. A quick trick that grabs your focus, and allows you to access other aspects.

M: So, along those lines, how do you typically begin a project? Do you seek an error in your own work? The work of others?

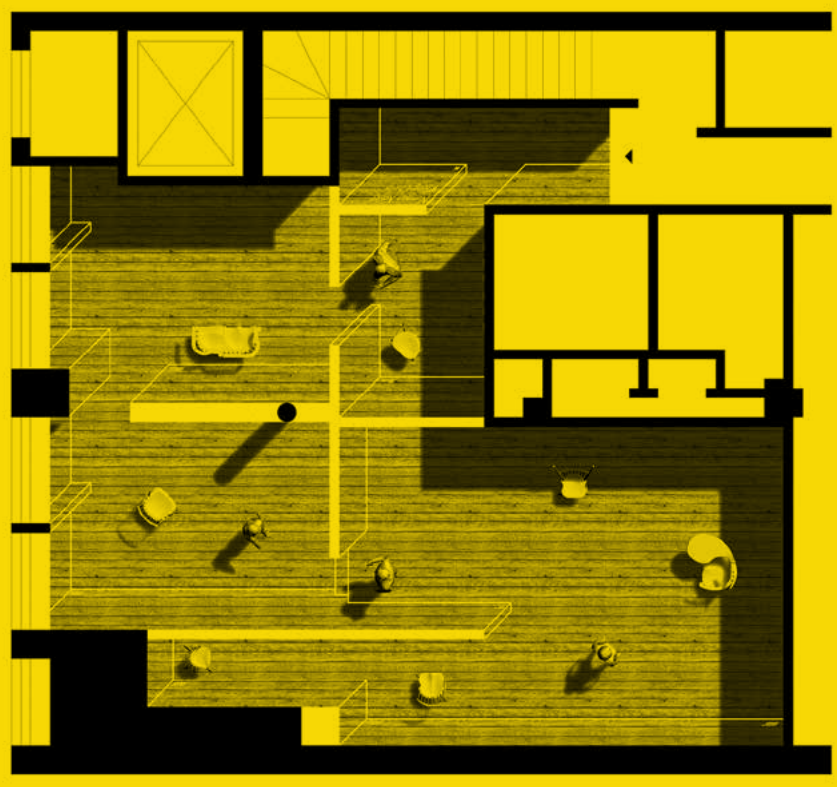
K: We're big fans of the precedent. At times, we reference popular culture or disciplines outside of architecture, but whenever we do that, it's always through the lens of the architect. Exposing, you might say, a leftist-sensibility about how we approach these issues. Most recently, we published some drawings in LOG, under the category of 'New Ancients'. So, now we're starting to find our work resonate with other architects working today who are trying to recuperate anachronistic styles and methods of architecture, not so much in the way of post-modernism, but trying to uncover aspects from the renaissance and other overlooked grey-areas within the history of not only architecture, but the history of graphic design, sculpture, painting. History is very important for us. We don't think that great architecture should take a lot of effort, so we tend to sidestep invention in favor of appropriation.

G: How does appropriation play into your interest in error?

K: I think you have to believe in much of the criticism of history that exists, that someone missed something. Through appropriation, we're hoping to pick up on lines that someone would have missed. That's where the error comes into play. Mining for 'precise mistakes' that were made.

G: Are these mistakes that you're making, or mistakes in the past?

K: I think that it's two-fold. In many ways we're trying to mine mistakes that we have seen and are trying to reuse. It's an issue of resolution, in image and geometry. So, today when we see everything on a screen, what is the potential for a low resolution, if it is handled precisely? More potential mis-readings, I think. There's also a notion of approximated geometry, where something curved can actually be made from straight-line segments. As we deploy them in practice, we realize that they tend to come off as 'one-liners'. So, for instance, in this collection of chairs we did, it's a medley of errors at different resolutions and different scales. We can see how coupling these idiosyncrasies can start to produce an aesthetic. One that is precise, yet at the same time, inciting some sort of double-take.



M: Beyond the aesthetic, do you think that your work is leaving mistakes for others to investigate?

K: I hope so, yeah. I think that each time you tell a story, you edit out information. Out of either embarrassment, or out of time, and each time we present our work or showcase our work, we try to highlight only a few moments. We can't really curate what other readings might be. For us, that means producing highly precise analytical drawings, of the drawings or of the works, which allow us to mine things that we may not have seen before.

G: As a student, I can think of times when mis-readings of my own work frustrate me, and I don't know how to mine these kinds of errors. Was there some sort of transition point for you? Was this a position that you've always held?

K: I think the error is always going to be unsettling. It will always rattle. It tends to make people uncomfortable. As much as we're trying to condition to become accepting of errors, we're trying not to as well. If it works, then you may live to fight another day, and if not, you just get rid of it. There are art practices that are based off of this idea. There is a genre of error-art, which is about the glitches. That's something that we also find unsettling. There is this threshold: a moment where the error becomes one of two things. It either becomes a 'monster', something completely alien to the point of reference, or it becomes too contrived. There is, let's say, an element of the casual embedded in the type of errors that we're most interested in using.

M: Based on that, who is your favorite architect who makes work like you do?

K: Good question. I am a big fan of Sharon Johnston and Mark Lee. I love their work, and they might argue that their work is architecture potentially in the service of art. I find their work to be the most compelling in North America. I'm interested in them because they don't play a quick game of 'scaling up'. I also think that Sarah Oppenheimer, who is more camped in the art world, is a great architect. And finally, probably our biggest role model would be Elizabeth Diller and Ric Scofidio. Their game-strategy was actually a brilliant strategy because it's non-competitive. When you're an artist hanging out with architects, you don't tend to give out that competitive air. And vice versa.

G: With the example of Diller Scofidio Renfro, we start to see a new paradigm in design practice, where individuals start working at first as artists, then just start scaling up. Do you think that this is a new paradigm?

K: I actually think this is a well-trodden path. Some of the biggest practices now bought into the mid to late nineties installation-architect mode of practice, and are just now getting their feet wet with their own practices. In addition to studying the history of Bramante and Peruzzi, we're also interested in more recent history, that is, what it means to run a practice that's more conventional. At the end of the day, there are so many good examples that rely on so many different ways of how to define successful architecture practice.

Now we're in the age of the boutique corporate firm, which I would say is the more nuanced practice. I think that it's high design paired with big-scale ambitions. Our team is very small right now; we only consist of two people. The type of work is bent on available resources. We're not funding our own projects, and so we have to rethink means of getting projects. And, we're trying to avoid competitions at all cost. I think that the last competition that we submitted for was two years ago.

M: Why avoid competition?

K: It's just so punishing. You're giving away ideas for free. I don't actually think that the United States has a very good track record for competitions assisting young architects. So, we need to be a little bit craftier about what it means to solicit work. I think that lends itself again to this notion of counter-intuition. Rethinking the norm at all costs.

M: What are you currently working on?

K: So, we're really trying to scale up now. We will be working towards a very small cottage in Chicago. We're also, as complete amateurs, making a foray into graphic design, doing brand identity for a gallery. Trying to tackle both conventional modes of practice while at the same time, trying to expand what that means. The graphic design job came up because someone liked the way that we laid out our boards. On the one hand, it's a let down, because they were missing the content entirely, on the other hand, that's as much a part of the project, the presentation of the work. That's maybe why we always like the black and white.

The biggest hurdle we're working on is geography. My partner lives in New York and I live in Chicago. This is purely out of necessity, we need to pay bills, but also it becomes a pragmatic issue. Early on, we decided that I would take a more academic route and she would take on a practitioner's role, so she's the licensed one, she has the stamp, and maybe I'm more of the space cadet. There are a lot of other partnerships that are bent on this balancing act between different sensibilities. We agree on certain things, but at the end of the day the best projects both conflict and agree. Through that, there's an ability to accept dissatisfaction because through conflict we observe something that we couldn't have otherwise achieved. Right now, it's all about trying to develop and evolve a working relationship between us two. One thing that we've discovered is how fast you can work when someone is right in front of you. We've become so comfortable with Skyping and texting that we forget that the face to face is paramount.